

Section Two

## Understanding Basic Standards for A Quality Out-of-School Time Program

### What are the Aspects of a Quality Program?

The term “out-of-school time program” (OST program) refers to the broad range of programs available to children and youth ages five to fourteen that take place outside the regular school day. These programs include before and after school as well as summer and weekend programs. They encompass programs that have such focuses as tutoring, recreation, arts, character education, literacy, service-learning, and general enrichment.

Regardless of when a program meets and what focus it has, there are certain ingredients that are generally evident in programs that are deemed successful by parents, staff, young people, and others who have a stake in the program. Research and field testing done by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) and the National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA)<sup>\*</sup> have resulted in the “NSACA Standards for Quality School-Age Care,” a set of national standards that form the foundation for a self-assessment and accreditation system that recognizes high-quality programs. The Standards are used by programs across the country to assess the current state of their program, set goals for program improvement, and/or pursue accreditation through NSACA. (For more details on NSACA and accreditation, see the tip sheet section of this manual.)

The NSACA Standards are organized into six categories: Human Relationships, Indoor and Outdoor Environment, Activities, Safety, Health and Nutrition, and Administration. Under each of these categories are observable “keys to quality” that further define the elements of a quality program. Complete information on the NSACA Standards can be found in the book, *The NSACA Standards for Quality School-Age Care* (see resource list at the end of this section for further details).

Members and volunteers from Corporation for National Service programs who work in OST programs can do a great deal to make an impact on program quality. Once they

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<sup>\*</sup> NSACA is the only national membership organization representing the entire array of public, private, and community-based providers of after school programs. NSACA has over 8,000 members and thirty-five affiliated state organizations and sponsors a national conference for over 2,000 practitioners and advocates. NSACA promotes national standards of quality school-age care for children and youth five to fourteen years old, and grants accreditation to programs meeting the standards. NSACA is headquartered in Boston and has a public policy liaison located in Washington, DC.

## Understanding Standards for Quality

understand the basic ingredients of a quality program, members and volunteers can design new programs with high standards of quality. In the case of existing programs, members and volunteers can help improve program quality by collaborating with program staff to set and work toward goals that reflect generally accepted quality standards. Many OST programs are under-staffed and under-funded; as they focus on making ends meet, these programs often do not have the resources of time and staff necessary to focus on enhancing the overall quality of their program. Members and volunteers can come in with a fresh perspective as well as the time and energy necessary to assess program quality and develop and implement plans for quality improvement.

In order to create quality programs or improve existing programs, members and volunteers need to work closely with all other stakeholders (program staff, parents, school personnel, young people, etc.) to assess needs and develop an action plan built on consensus and shared vision.

This chapter offers a set of quality measures that are specifically geared toward the work of members and volunteers in OST programs. With permission from NSACA, the standards presented here are adapted from the official NSACA standards. This chapter is organized into two sections: a section describing basic quality measures and a section offering specific ideas for how members and volunteers can impact each quality measure. Following is a list of the basic quality measures to be further discussed in this chapter:

### Quality Measures

- **Positive human relationships:** consistent and caring relationships between young people and adults and between young people and their peers
- **Effective programming:** constructive and well-planned schedules and activities that are tailored to the needs and interests of youth, parents, and all other stakeholders
- **Appropriate environments:** sufficient safe and clean space for indoor and outdoor activities, attractive and welcoming décor, appropriate space, supplies and furnishings to support the program's activities
- **Strong partnerships with young people, families, schools, and communities:** active relationships with all stakeholders in the program; input from families, schools, and young people on all aspects of the program; involvement of school staff, parents, and community volunteers in running the program
- **Effective staff and administration:** committed and well-trained staff and volunteers, frequent and efficient staff meetings, sufficient funding, program policies that are understood and accepted by all stakeholders

## **How Can the Quality of a Program be Assessed?**

The quality of a program can be assessed through analyzing the human relationships, programming, environments, partnerships, and administration of that program. In the following pages, each aspect of quality is broken down into specific checkpoints. These and other checkpoints you may come up with can be used by members and volunteers to:

- Analyze how well a program exemplifies a given aspect of quality
- Develop policies, programming, and a vision for a new program
- Assess the overall quality of an existing program and make suggestions and/or plans for enhancing the program's quality

For more specific ideas and examples that support these standards, look at the book, *The NSACA Standards for Quality School-Age Care*. Additionally, NIOST has produced a set of self-assessment materials called "ASQ" (Advancing School-Age Quality) that offers more in-depth tools and information for program assessment.

### **Human Relationships**

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How can a program foster the security and development of social skills that comes from meaningful relationships among young people and between young people and adults?

- The ratio of adults to youth is better than 1:15.
- Adults relate to young people in positive ways.
  - ✓ Respect
  - ✓ Interest and listening
  - ✓ Understanding
- Adults learn about and work to accommodate young people's individual needs through meetings with parents of individual children, connections with schoolteachers, one-on-one time with youth, etc.
- Adults use positive techniques to guide the behavior of children and youth. (See information on behavior guidance in the "Training Materials" section of this manual.)
- Young people are encouraged to interact with each other in positive ways and are commended for helping each other, including others in games, and noticing the needs of others.
- Adults involved in the program (including program staff, school staff, volunteers, and parents/guardians) interact with each other in positive ways.

## **Programming**

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What are the elements of quality programming?

- A flexible daily schedule is established, which offers young people:
  - ✓ Security
  - ✓ Independence
  - ✓ Choices among a variety of youth-centered and age-appropriate activities
  
- Programming includes opportunities to:
  - ✓ Develop academic skills (math games, time for reading individually and in groups, homework support, tutoring)
  - ✓ Engage in recreation and outdoor play
  - ✓ Participate in meaningful service-learning projects
  - ✓ Enhance creativity and express themselves through art
  - ✓ Explore and develop interests and talents
  - ✓ Learn to work as part of a team
  - ✓ Experience the satisfaction of completing both long- and short-term hands-on projects with tangible results
  - ✓ Think about and develop positive character traits (such as honesty, kindness, and courage) and social-emotional competence through projects, discussions, stories, and games
  - ✓ Develop leadership skills
  - ✓ Relax and rest
  - ✓ Learn about healthy eating and get the nutrition they need by preparing and eating snacks
  
- Activities are well planned, adequate materials are available, and staff members are prepared to lead activities. (All staff members have specific responsibilities for planning, preparing materials, and leading activities.)
  
- Activities and curriculum reflect the wants and needs of young people, families, and schools. (Wants and needs can be assessed through focus groups and surveys.)
  
- Children and youth are supervised at all times by qualified adults.
  
- Regular staff meetings are held to plan curriculum and debrief about activities. Members and volunteers are involved in these meetings.

*(See information on “Creating a Quality Program” in the training materials section of this manual for more specific ideas on programming.)*

## **Environment**

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What are the elements of effective out-of-school time program environments?

- Indoor space is attractive and arranged to accommodate a variety of activities.
  - ✓ Quiet reading area with ample books available and comfortable places to sit and read
  - ✓ Area for homework with tables and chairs
  - ✓ Game area with tables and rugs for playing on the floor
  - ✓ Arts/crafts area with supplies
  - ✓ Computer stations
  - ✓ Space for indoor group games
  
- A wide variety of books, games, and art supplies is accessible to children and youth.
  
- There is an organized storage area for materials.
  
- There is adequate heat and plenty of light.
  
- There is adequate and safe outdoor space and daily time for outdoor play.
  
- Children and youth have access to a variety of outdoor play equipment such as balls and jump ropes.
  
- There are regular safety checks of indoor and outdoor environments and equipment.  
*(For more specific ideas, see the section on environment in the tip sheet section.)*

## **Partnerships with Young People, Families, Schools, and Communities**

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How can effective partnerships with all stakeholders in an out-of-school time program be established and maintained?

- Young people help:
  - ✓ plan and lead activities on a regular basis
  - ✓ design and decorate the environment
  - ✓ determine the rules they will abide by while at the program
  
- Youth's interests, needs, and satisfaction with the program are regularly assessed (using surveys, focus groups, etc.).

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- Young people rotate through positions of leadership (e.g., passing out snacks, being a member of a youth advisory group that helps plan activities, tutoring or otherwise assisting younger children).
- Families are involved in program planning and informed of activities (e.g., through instituting regular meetings of a family advisory group, or sending home newsletters).
- Concerns about young people as well as reports about accomplishments and good behavior are regularly shared with families (e.g., through regular meetings with individual parents, daily verbal reports when children are picked up, or regular written reports).
- Families, school personnel, and community members are urged to contribute time and talents as volunteers (e.g., leading clubs, acting as chaperones for field trips, helping with special events, coming in as guest speakers).
- Parents and school staff participate in surveys and/or focus groups to assess and discuss needs, ideas, and satisfaction with the program.
- Program staff are connected to school staff for information and idea sharing (e.g., schools and OST programs regularly exchange newsletters, attend each other's staff meetings, and develop joint goals for young people who are in need of special attention).
- Children and youth are involved in their community through planning and participating in service-learning projects. (See information on service-learning in the training materials section for specific ideas.)
- Links are built between young people and the community through bringing in community volunteers to share their expertise and taking youth out to learn more about community organizations (e.g., a police officer comes in to offer a bicycle safety course, children are taken to the fire department to learn about what firefighters do).
- Community businesses are invited to donate specific materials to the program and encourage employees to volunteer in the program.
- Staff know about and provide information to families on community organizations that can provide resources and/or counseling on such issues as substance abuse, learning disabilities, child abuse, behavioral concerns, and effective parenting.
- Families, community members, and school personnel are invited to regular celebrations of young people's activities and accomplishments.

### Staff and Administration

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What should be done to ensure that the staff and administration of a program are as effective as possible?

- All staff are professionally qualified to work with children and youth. (i.e., staff meet state licensing requirements for working with children\*, have a specified number or hours of experience).
- Background checks are done on all staff members and volunteers.
- Staff members and volunteers participate in an orientation as well as basic training before starting to work in the program. Examples of orientation and training topics include:
  - ✓ job responsibilities
  - ✓ program policies
  - ✓ understanding the basic standards of a quality program
  - ✓ behavior guidance
  - ✓ child and youth development
  - ✓ working with families
  - ✓ curriculum planning
  - ✓ CPR and First Aid
  - ✓ topics specific to various components of the program

*(Some of these subjects are covered in the training materials section of this manual.)*

- Staff and volunteers participate in regular in-service training (weekly, bimonthly, or monthly) that offers information and ongoing training on pertinent issues. Trainers are brought in from outside organizations to present on various topics.
- Staff and volunteers have regular meetings to plan activities, discuss young people's needs, and assess the effectiveness of the program.
- Staff and volunteers receive appropriate support from the program director (i.e., they are able to turn to the program director with needs and concerns, they regularly give and receive feedback).
- The program has policies about such issues as:
  - ✓ Security: documents specifying who is allowed to pick up each child, child sign-in, sign-out procedures

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\* See "Legal Issues: Licensing and Liability" in the Tip Sheets section (Section Five) of this manual for information on state-imposed training and experience requirements for staff members.

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- ✓ Safeguarding health: food-handling procedures, hand-washing rules, separate storage space for each child's coat and belongings
- ✓ Penalties: consequences for picking up children late, fees for late payment of program dues
- Program policies are made clear to staff, families, and young people.
  - ✓ The program has a handbook that spells out all program policies and this handbook is given out to all families, staff members, and volunteers.
  - ✓ Rules and policies directly affecting young people are explained to them and posted for all to see.

## How Can Members And Volunteers Impact Program Quality?

Once members and volunteers understand the basic aspects of a quality program, the next question is, what can they do to impact program quality? This section contains suggestions for specific strategies. The suggestions offered below can be used in creating an action plan that is built on the consensus and shared vision of members, volunteers, program staff, school staff, parents, and other stakeholders.

### Human Relationships

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To improve the quality of human relationships fostered by a program, members and volunteers can:

- Recruit community volunteers to come into the program as tutors, mentors, club leaders, etc. This will improve the adult-to-youth ratio and increase opportunities for adults and young people to build mutually beneficial relationships.
- Model interested, kind, and encouraging behavior in interactions with children and youth (serve as a model for young people and other adults in the program).
- Model behavior guidance techniques for other staff members and/or offer training on appropriate behavior management.
- Encourage appropriate interactions between young people; take time to talk to youth individually about the way they interact with others and involve them in conflict resolution techniques.
- Set up and oversee peer tutoring or "reading buddy" relationships where young people help each other with homework or reading.

## **Environment**

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To improve the quality of the indoor and outdoor environments offered to children, members and volunteers can:

- Do an assessment of the environment -- indoor and outdoor -- or create an environmental assessment form for others to use. Look for safety and health hazards. Assess the space available and examine how well available space is used. Assess the décor and furnishings and the overall feeling of the space.
- Formulate a plan for improving the environment by reorganizing the use of space, negotiating for more use of space, adding more supplies, games, and resources, and enhancing the décor of the areas used.
- Involve children and parents in enhancing the environment. Ask them what they want and have them help get it.
- Ask for and secure donations from families, local businesses, libraries, or other organizations in the community. Ask for such items as art supplies, toys, posters, books, beanbag chairs, cushions, area rugs, bookshelves, or bulletin boards to enhance the environment.
- Secure the use of more outside play space. Find out about nearby parks or ask about use of additional space on site.
- Evaluate and improve availability and safety of outdoor play equipment.

## **Programming**

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To improve the quality of programming offered by a program, members and volunteers can:

- Assess needs of the children, parents, and community served as well as the quality of curriculum and activities being offered by observing and talking with young people, parents, and staff, holding focus groups, administering surveys. Offer suggestions on improving curriculum based on your findings. Create new components such as those mentioned in the following points.
- Set up new “clubs” based on members’/volunteers’ interests and expertise (such as art, creative writing, soccer, basketball, dance, travel/geography). Make sure these clubs are offered regularly and that activities are well prepared.
- Set up a homework component to offer homework support. Find out what parents want as far as homework is concerned and work with parents and staff to set up an effective homework program.
- Set up one-on-one tutoring for young people in need of special help – recruit community members to help or have older children tutor younger children.

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- Create and lead theme-based activities. Work with staff and young people to develop ideas for themes that can be integrated into all aspects of the program for a certain period of time. Themes could include nature, different cultures, music, community service, or journalism. Design and lead activities that go with this theme. Integrate theme-based activities into all aspects of the program.
- Build on themes and activities going on during the school day. Find out about what young people are doing in school and create after school programming that will complement school-day programming.
- Lead service-learning activities. Get young people involved in meaningful service to their community.
- Visit other program sites and gather ideas for activities and effective programming.

### **Partnerships with Young People, Families, Schools, and Communities**

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To impact a program's development of effective and appropriate partnerships, members and volunteers can:

- Set up and supervise roles of responsibility for young people such as preparing snack or making sure everyone's coats and bags get hung up.
- Establish a youth advisory group that meets regularly to help plan activities, discuss program rules, and talk about current issues in the program.
- Assess current partnerships and develop a plan for building further partnerships with young people, families, schools, and communities.
- Set up regular parent meetings where parents discuss curriculum, activities and needs with OST program staff.
- Set up a strategy for regularly connecting with the schoolteachers of young people in the program (go to teacher meetings, set up times for teachers to observe the OST program, develop a process for reporting on specific children's needs and concerns).
- Develop and disseminate newsletters to families, schools, and community partners, telling them about the program's past and future activities and spelling out program needs they might be able to fill.
- Set up a volunteer program encouraging parents, family members, school personnel and community members to come in regularly to lead a club, help with homework, or help with other specific activities. Set up "special occasion" volunteer opportunities to involve those who can't volunteer regularly (chaperoning a field trip, helping with a party, bringing in special treats).

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- Put together regular parties or celebrations for families, school personnel, and community members to come in and learn about the activities young people have been doing. Young people can prepare galleries of their artwork, put on a play, do a musical number, do presentations about projects they've completed, or hold a multicultural festival celebrating different cultures. Advertise these events well in advance and build excitement. Hold events on-site at your program at the close of the day for optimal attendance. Have everyone bring food to make it more fun.
- Develop partnerships with hospitals, homeless shelters, food pantries, or nursing homes. Plan regular service projects with these agencies and invite personnel from these agencies to come in and share information on what they do.
- Reach out to cultural institutions such as libraries, museums, and theaters. Find out information on prices and current exhibits and plan field trips.
- Develop relationships with community centers, colleges, universities, and high schools. Ask them to help you recruit volunteers to lead special clubs, help with homework, or serve as tutors and mentors.
- Develop partnerships with local businesses and ask them for donations (such as food, art supplies, games, toys, paper) as well as volunteer help. Invite those who donate to attend special events with young people.

## Staff and Administration

To impact the effectiveness of a program's staff and administrative practices, members and volunteers can:

- Bring in trainers or offer to present training on such subjects as special needs, learning disabilities, behavior guidance, detecting child abuse, educating young people about drugs and alcohol or other pertinent issues, homework help strategies, tutoring techniques.
- Design a standard orientation and training for staff and volunteers. Components could include a site tour, explanation of all program policies, and training on activities involved in the program.
- Work with staff to establish program policies and/or write up a policy handbook for all parents and staff members.
- Recruit volunteers to come into the program as tutors, club leaders, or guest speakers.
- Create job descriptions and contracts for various staff and volunteer positions in order to spell out expectations.
- Help design a regular program assessment process. Design survey forms, administer surveys and convene focus groups to find out the attitudes of program staff, school staff, young people, and parents towards the program and find out more about their needs and wants.

## **Resources for More Information on Quality**

*Following are a sampling of the many resources available on this subject. This listing does not constitute an endorsement by NIOST.*

The National School-Age Care Alliance  
website: [www.NSACA.org](http://www.NSACA.org)

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time  
website: [www.NIOST.org](http://www.NIOST.org)

*The NSACA Standards for Quality School-Age Care.* Available by calling NSACA at (617)298-5012.

*Video: Making the MOST of Out-of-School Time: The Human Side of Quality,* 11 minutes. This video demonstrates the effective application of the Standards in out-of-school time programs. Available by calling the National Institute on Out-of-School Time at (781)283-2510.

*ARQ: Advancing and Recognizing Quality;* School-age program improvement and accreditation kit. The kit contains:

- Advancing School-Age Child Care Quality (ASQ)
- The Team Leader's Manual including a Resource Guide for School-Age Programs
- Loose leaf binder with materials for easy copying: agendas, questionnaires, summary sheets, observation form with the NSACA Standards, etc.
- Several Team Member Books
- Several copies of the "NSACA Standards of Quality School-Age Care at a Glance" brochure
- Video on observing your program and working as a team
- Recognizing School-Age Quality assessment materials
- Guide to NSACA Program Accreditation (guidelines, explanation of endorser visit, criteria for accreditation)
- The application for NSACA accreditation
- Poster from NIOST on what it takes to support quality including the NSACA Standards of Quality.

To order, call NSACA at (617)298-5012